

Toward a Better 'Hezekiah': The Literary Structuring of Isaiah 1–39

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes a new structure for Isa 1–39 in its received form that brings together the observations of numerous studies concerning individual units and themes within this larger section of the book. Whereas parallels have been discerned between Isa 1–12 and Isa 13–27, here it is argued that those parallels can be found in Isa 28–39 as well. Particular attention will be paid to how the pieces of the book contribute to the reader's evolving perception of the figure of Hezekiah. The person or school who crafted the book called Isaiah initially exalts the figure of Hezekiah such that the naïve reader might be led to hope that Hezekiah was the idealised Davidic ruler of Isa 1–12. Therefore, Hezekiah's failure in Isa 39 that leads to the exile is all the more disappointing. The presentation of Hezekiah in the book called Isaiah comes into starker relief when compared to the presentations in the books of Kings and Chronicles. The Chronicler's re-telling of the Hezekiah stories points backwards to the Isaiah editors' priorities in adopting material from Kings.¹

KEYWORDS: Literary Structure, Book of Kings, Book of Isaiah, Hezekiah, Book of Chronicles

A INTRODUCTION

Adele Berlin has observed that biblical poetry is paratactic in that the syntactic connection between two or more poetic lines is often unclear: "The lines, by virtue of their contiguity, are perceived as connected, while the exact relationship

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¹ This paper originated in discussions with Gary Schnittjer and the students in my courses on Isaiah at Cairn University and LCC International University. I am also grateful for the input of the participants in the OT Prophets section at the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament (Aberdeen, 2019), and for the comments of the anonymous *OTE* reviewers.

between them is left unspecified.”² This is also frequently true of sections within books, particularly those composed primarily of poetry. Given what is known about the production of scribal works in the oral culture of the ancient Near East, caution is warranted when reconstructing the compositional history of such works. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to consider the arrangement of elements within the texts that we have, particularly, when synoptic or chronological considerations suggest that editorial decisions are significant for the meaning of a given section.

1 The Curious Placement of Hezekiah Material in the Book of Isaiah

A great deal has been written about Isa 36–39, its structure and historical background and its relationship to what comes before and after it in the book of Isaiah. We will begin with Seitz’s observed parallels between chapters 1–12 and 13–27 and then consider whether those parallels are present in chapters 28–39. We are also following, among others, Katheryn Pfisterer Darr in focusing on the reader’s assessment of Hezekiah “based on a sequential reading” of Isaiah up to and through the narratives of Isa 36–37, 38 and 39.³

Significant sectional breaks have been recognised in the book of Isaiah between chapters 12 and 13 and between 27 and 28, indicating that Isa 1–12 is some sort of unit and 13–27 is some sort of unit.⁴ However, beyond chapter 27 there is little consensus as whether Isa 28–39 possesses any coherent structure. It has been argued that chapters 28–32; 28–33; 28–35 or 28–39 form the next significant unit.

The apparent editorial choice of which Hezekiah material to include in the book of Isaiah is also relevant. How should we understand the material in 2 Kgs 18:14–16, the so-called Source A, in which Hezekiah tries to buy off the king of Assyria—has this material been consciously omitted from Isa 36 and to what end? What are we to make of the addition in Isa 38:9–20—not found in 2 Kings—the “writing” of Hezekiah after his recovery?

2 Argument

This argument proceeds in three stages. First, I will point out three features of Isa 36–39 that present Hezekiah in a more positive light than might be suggested by all the evidence found in 2 Kings. Second, I will argue that these features of

² Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 6.

³ Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, “No Strength to Deliver: A Contextual Analysis of Hezekiah’s Proverb in Isaiah 37.3b,” in *New Visions of Isaiah* (ed. Roy F. Melugin and Marvin A. Sweeney; JSOTSupp 214; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 219–256.

⁴ Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39* (Interpretation Series; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 203.

this narrative section actually allow for a reading that views Isa 28–38 as a unit with affinities to other major units in First Isaiah. In other words, the editorial choices of presenting Hezekiah in the best light in chapters 36–38 are the same choices that make Isa 28–38 look somewhat like 1–12 and 13–27. Third, I will compare the editorial approaches of Kings, Isaiah and Chronicles with respect to Hezekiah and demonstrate that the Chronicler accomplishes something similar to the First Isaiah editor but with different aims.

3 Method and Premises

There remains significant debate regarding the relationship of certain chapters and the extent of units in the book of Isaiah. Establishing “authenticity,” dates and provenance of specific oracles or sections in the book is not a concern in this essay. It may be that much of Isa 1–39 has its origin in the lifetime of Isaiah—the turn of the eighth to seventh centuries—but the material has undoubtedly been shaped, arranged, updated, explained, and supplemented in light of later events such as the reign of Josiah, the fall of the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian conquest and the Persian conquest of Babylon. This allows us to consider texts against the backdrop of several historical settings.

While this might be called a “synchronic” approach or even Childs’s “canonical” approach it might be helpful to think of the *parts* and the *whole* sitting in uneasy tension with one another—the parts drawing the reader toward atomistic exegesis and the whole pressing the reader to see connections and coherence. In this article, I do in fact posit one sort of coherence but this of course does not eliminate the necessity of diachronic analysis.

Two significant debates about textual development are related to this study of First Isaiah—the relationship between Isa 36–39 and parallel material in 2 Kgs 18–20 as well as the relationship between Chronicles and a so-called Deuteronomistic History. The positions from which I will cautiously argue are as follows. First, the material in Isa 36–39 is drawn from 2 Kgs 18–20⁵ rather than the other way around.⁶ There are elements in the Isaiah stories that appear to assume knowledge of material in Kings—for example, the Rabshakeh’s

⁵ The tendency since Duhm’s “Three Isaiahs” division has been to view the Kings account as original and later adopted as a conclusion to Proto-Isaiah on analogy with LXX Jer. Kaiser notes: “Since II Kings 18.13, with its parallel Isa 36.1, clearly belongs to the annalistic passage II Kings 18.13–16, which has not been included in the book of Isaiah, it seems obvious that it is the book of Kings which has the priority”; Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39: A Commentary* (OTL; trans. R.A. Wilson; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974[1973]), 367.

⁶ See the discussions in Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 459; Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 243–244; Ulrich F. Berges, *The Book of Isaiah: Its Composition and Final Form* (trans. Millard C. Lind; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012 [1998]), 245–256.

allusion to Hezekiah’s removal of high places and altars (2 Kgs 18:4). Thus, the so-called Source A—the account of Hezekiah initially paying tribute to Sennacherib (2 Kgs 18:14–16)—was consciously omitted in the editing of the book of Isaiah.⁷

Second, I take the mainstream (though not uncontested) position that the Chronicler worked with Samuel and Kings as sources in something like their received forms.⁸

Third, the Chronicler was aware of the book called Isaiah (2 Chr 32:32). Thus, in this article, I suggest that the Chronicler recognised some of the same “problems” with the Kings narrative that the editor of Isaiah sought to correct and also sought to address those problems within his own theological and historiographical framework.

B TOWARD A HOPEFUL ‘HEZEKIAH’ IN FIRST ISAIAH: EDITORIAL CHOICES

Several features of Isa 36–39, as adopted from 2 Kgs 18–20, contribute to a more positive portrait of Hezekiah than all the data might warrant (see Table 1 below).

First, chronologically, the “Hezekiah’s Recovery” and “Babylonian Emissary” stories occur prior to or in the midst of the Sennacherib Invasion. All three accounts—Kings, Isaiah, Chronicles—present the events in the same sequence, which differs from the apparent “real-life” chronology. This is not

⁷ One approach views the so-called Source A (2 Kgs 18:14–16) and Sources B¹ and B² as accounts of the same invasion; see the discussions in Lester L. Grabbe, ed., *‘Like a Bird in a Cage’: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (JSOTSupp 363; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003). A key issue in this discussion is whether either or both of the accounts can be reconciled with the evidence from the Annals of Sennacherib. Regardless of whether Sources A or B can be so reconciled, I contend that they are best read as referring to distinct events as presented in 2 Kgs 18–19 and the key detail is that the Source A has the effect of “ton[ing] down the otherwise positive account of Hezekiah” (Lester L. Grabbe, “Introduction,” in *‘Like a Bird in a Cage’: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (JSOTSupp 363; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 33).

⁸ Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the contribution of significant critics of the mainstream view such as Person and Auld, who argue that Samuel–Kings and Chronicles are drawn from a common source. The quite complex relationship between the Hezekiah stories in these three works has made these texts “ground zero” for redaction-critical studies. Auld devotes a significant chapter to the Hezekiah narratives in his recent book and Person has written a monograph related to the subject. See Raymond F. Person Jr., *The Kings–Isaiah and Kings–Jeremiah Recensions* (BZAW 252; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997); Raymond F. Person Jr., *The Deuteronomistic History and the Book of Chronicles: Scribal Works in an Oral World* (AIL 6; Atlanta: SBL, 2010); Graeme, A. Auld, *Life in Kings: Reshaping the Royal Story in the Hebrew Bible* (AIL 30; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017).

surprising if Isaiah and Kings are literarily dependent on one another or on a common source⁹ and if Chronicles is dependent on Kings.

Second, the account of Hezekiah initially paying tribute to Sennacherib (2 Kgs 18:14–16), seems to have been consciously omitted in the editing of the book of Isaiah. Na'aman expresses the effect of this decision:

As many scholars have noted, the omission of vv. 14-16 from the text of Isaiah is due to the idealization of the figure of Hezekiah in exilic and postexilic periods as a king who trusted YHWH, and by his piety rescued Jerusalem from the Assyrian threat. His conduct in time of siege and grave danger was contrasted with that of the last kings of Judah, who, in similar situations, brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. By omitting the verses that relate the success of the Assyrian campaign, Hezekiah's submission and the payment of a heavy tribute to Assyria, the editor of Isaiah obliterated all signs of failure on the part of Hezekiah, thereby reshaping the king's image. A clear sign of the extensive intervention of the Isaianic editor in the introduction to the story is the omission of Tartan and Rab-saris from the list of Assyrian delegates (Isa. 36.2).¹⁰

Third, the "Psalm of Hezekiah," his prayer after recovery (38:9–20), is therefore an addition by the editor of Isaiah, which undoubtedly presents Hezekiah as a pious king.¹¹

As Table 1 makes apparent, these three editorial choices (two made by the Isaiah editor and one a pre-existing feature of his Kings source text) have the effect of turning quite a "mixed bag" of Hezekiah's activities into a string of

⁹ Roberts is "inclined to believe... [that] both collections independently borrow from a third, independent source." J.J.M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 443. Motyer argues for a common source but allows that the author of Isaiah made a conscious omission: "The theory which best fits the facts is that both Isaiah and Kings had access to annals and records and used them to suit their own purposes as historians. This would explain why Kings (18:14–16) includes, but Isaiah omits, Hezekiah's submission. The one aims at completeness of detail, the other at a historical excerpt wedded to a theological purpose"; J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 286.

¹⁰ Nadav Na'aman, "Updating the Messages: Hezekiah's Second Prophetic Story (2 Kgs 19.9b-35) and the Community of Babylonian Deportees," in *Like a Bird in a Cage*, 201–220 (203–204).

¹¹ In Kings, Hezekiah asks for a sign that he will recover (2 Kgs 20:8); the Isaiah editor has moved this request to the end (Isa 38:22). This heightens the contrast with Ahaz, who is told to ask for a sign but does not (Isa 7:12) and perhaps slightly enhances the presentation of Hezekiah as a pious king.

positive successes with only one negative moment at the conclusion. Seow observes:

Readers may prefer that the story of Hezekiah ended with his miraculous recovery by grace through faith, for that would make a wonderful theological denouement. That is not the final word, however. Hezekiah’s trust in God does not seem so firm after all. He, who has been portrayed as a model of faith and piety, turns to the Babylonians, for reasons that the narrator does not bother to explain ... Interpreters from time immemorial have been uncomfortable with this negative portrayal of Hezekiah at the end of the mostly positive assessment of his reign. One must not try to exonerate Hezekiah for the sake of literary coherence, however.¹²

A fourth editorial decision does not contribute to a positive portrait of Hezekiah but rather to the sharpness of the conclusion of First Isaiah’s presentation of Hezekiah. While the Deuteronomistic account concludes with a summary statement of Hezekiah’s building achievements, including the Siloam Tunnel (2 Kgs 20:20), Isa 39 makes no reference to these achievements or to the succession by Manasseh. This abruptness shifts the focus to Hezekiah’s failure—which was “unexpected” in light of all that had come before it (literarily)—and away from Manasseh and serves as the only transition to Isa 40 and beyond.

Table 1: Chronological Order of Events in Hezekiah's Reign

Events are noted as positive (+), negative (-), or not related to Hezekiah (•).

Reconstructed Chronological Order	2 Kings	Isaiah
+ Cultic reforms	+ Cultic reforms (18:3–6)	
• (Northern Israel succumbs to Assyria)	• (Northern Israel succumbs to Assyria; 17; 18:9–12)	
+ Illness and recovery	- Invasion of Judah; Hezekiah pays tribute (18:14–16)	
+ Prayer after recovery	+ Siege of Jerusalem, faith, reprieve (18:13, 18:17–19:8)	+ Siege of Jerusalem, faith, reprieve (36:1–37:8)
- Babylonian emissary	+ Siege again, faith, victory (19:9–37)	+ Siege again, faith, victory (37:9–38)
(+ Other achievements, including pool and tunnel—advance of the siege?)	+ Illness and recovery (20:1–11)	+ Illness and recovery (38:1–8, 21–22)
- Invasion of Judah; Hezekiah pays tribute		+ Prayer after recovery (38:9–20)

¹² Choon-Leong Seow, “The First and Second Books of Kings,” *New Interpreter’s Bible* (vol. III; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), III.274.

Events are noted as positive (+), negative (-), or not related to Hezekiah (•).

Reconstructed Chronological Order	2 Kings	Isaiah
+ Siege of Jerusalem, faith, reprieve	- Babylonian emissary (20:12–19)	- Babylonian emissary (39)
+ Siege again, faith, victory	+ Other achievements, including pool and tunnel (2 Kgs 20:20)	
Order: + • + + - (+?) - + +	Order: + • - + + + - +	Order: + + + + -

In contrast to the chronological order and the order narrated in 2 Kgs, Isa 36–38 presents Hezekiah in a uniformly positive manner. The order of events, the omission and the addition are part of this positive presentation. In the next section, I argue that this is part of an intentional structuring of Isa 28–38 that leads the reader to high hopes for Hezekiah, making the disappointing conclusion in Isa 39 seem more abrupt.

C ISAAH 28–39 AND THE STRUCTURE OF ISAAH

The interposition of Isa 36–39 and its selective presentation of Hezekiah may be read as serving several different theological and literary purposes. I argue that the placement of Isa 36–39 has one effect of creating a sort of coherence in Isa 28–39 by giving this section thematic parallels to previous coherent sections (Isa 1–12 and Isa 13–27). Several similarities that are observed between Isa 1–12 and Isa 13–27 may also be found in Isa 28–39 if that section is considered a unit. The connection of each section to the figure of Hezekiah make these similarities more apparent.

1 Unevenness in Isa 28–35 and Thematic Connections in Isa 28–39

Seitz observes that while it is generally acknowledged that Isa 1–12 and Isa 13–27 form distinct sections within Isa 1–39, there is no consensus on the unity of Isa 28–39.¹³ The narratives of Isa 36–37; 38 and 39 are variously associated with the poetic sections of 28–33 and 34–35 or even sections in Isa 40–66. These various emphases and associations permit one to see the next literary unit as Isa

¹³ Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 9. Begg, in a thematic survey of the sections of Isaiah, notes briefly that, “After the ‘nations’ interlude’ of chs. 13–27, Isaiah 28–39 reverts to a focus on Israel/Judah/Jerusalem” but he does not elaborate further on the unity of the section; see Christopher T. Begg, “The Peoples and the Worship of Yahweh in the Book of Isaiah,” in *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honour of John T. Willis* (ed. M. Patrick Graham, Rick R. Marrs and Steven L. McKenzie; JSOTSupp 284; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 35–55 (45).

28–32,¹⁴ Isa 28–33,¹⁵ or Isa 28–35.¹⁶ Chapter 39 with its prediction of exile serves as an appropriate segue to chapters 40 and onward, which presume this later reality.

The juxtaposition of narrative material with poetic oracles makes it challenging to discern any kind of literary coherence. However, both Isa 1–12 and Isa 13–27 are able to achieve a kind of coherent grouping of varied elements. The coherence of Isa 1–12 and Isa 13–27 invites the reader to see a similar kind of coherence in Isa 28–39. Isaiah 36–39 provides a narrative complement to Isa 28–35. The reader gets to observe Hezekiah relying not on Egypt or military might (Isa 31) but on YHWH (Isa 36–37). The healing promised in Isa 35:3–6 happens to Hezekiah in chapter 38. Finally, we see the reason that the exile happens (represented in Isa 34) despite Hezekiah's apparently wholehearted faith in YHWH (i.e., his failure in Isa 39).

Thus, it is possible to view Isa 28–39 as the next coherent unit in the book called Isaiah, based on its own ideas and themes. Next, we will consider parallels with other sections that strengthen the coherence of Isa 28–39.

2 Parallels between First Isaiah's Three Sections

We are now in a position to examine parallels between Isa 1–12, Isa 13–27 and Isa 28–39 (see Table 2). We will start out with the most obvious connections. Seitz points out that both 1–12 and 13–27 conclude with two hymns in praise of YHWH's salvation, introduced by the phrase ביום ההוא (Isa 12:1–3; 4–6; 26:1–6; 27:1–5).¹⁷ Later in this section, I will suggest parallels to Isa 28–39's poems embedded within narrative.

¹⁴ Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 233, observes that Isa 33 displays affinities with both chapters 28–32 and the so-called "Mini-Apocalypse," chapters 34–35.

¹⁵ Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Prophetic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); Gary Stansell, "Isaiah 28–33: Blest Be the Tie that Binds (Isaiah Together)," in *New Visions of Isaiah*, 68–103. Moreover, chapters 34 and 35 have affinities to Second Isaiah, suggesting that 34–35 and 36–39 have a sort of "interlocking" function that joins the pre-exilic and exilic sections of the book (28–33 and 36–39 are pre-exilic and look forward, while 34–35 and 40–55 are exilic and look backward); see Marvin A. Sweeney, "The Book of Isaiah as Prophetic Torah," in *New Visions of Isaiah*, 50–67 (53–55).

¹⁶ Vermeylen suggests the structure as follows, in parallel with LXX Jer and Ezek: Isa 1–12, "oracles of misfortune for Judah and Jerusalem"; Isa 13–27, "oracles of misfortune for the nations"; and Isa 28–35, "promises." See Jacques Vermeylen, "L'unité du livre d'Isaïe," in J. Vermeylen, ed., *The Book of Isaiah/Le Livre d'Isaïe: Les Oracles et leurs relectures unité et complexité de l'Ouvrage* (BETL 81; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), 11–53 (29).

¹⁷ Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 119.

Second, each of the three sections contains a litany of judgments. One striking parallel is the six "woes" of Isa 5 (vv. 8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22) and the six "woes" introducing chapters of Isa 28–33 (28:1; 29:1; 29:15; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1). Isaiah 13–23 consists of a litany of ten "burdens," oracles concerning various nations.

Third, each section condemns an antagonistic empire, militarily superior to Judah and the lesser surrounding peoples. YHWH makes use of this nation to judge other nations (including Israel and Judah) but the empire's ruler self-exalts and thus blasphemes YHWH. These similarities are relatively easy to see across the three major sections. In Isa 7–10, the empire is Assyria, YHWH's instrument of judgment against Aram, Israel, other nations and eventually Judah (7:20; 8:4–8; 10:5–6, 15). The blaspheming ruler is its king who believes that the God of Judah will be overcome just like the gods of the other nations (10:7–14). Isaiah 13–27 may reflect a more varied set of historical settings than Isa 1–12 but the thematic parallels to that section are apparent. In Isa 13–14, Babylon and its king are YHWH's instrument of judgment upon nations (13:3–16) and the king likewise exalts himself (14:12–15). References in 21:9 and 23:13 return the focus to Babylon at the conclusion of the Oracles against the Nations (OAN) section, as do the apocalyptic judgment scenes of Isa 24–25. Lastly, in Isa 28–38 Assyria and Sennacherib become the main antagonists for Judah once again, with the words of the Rabshakeh and the king echoing Isa 10 (36:18–20; 37:10–13). Judgment is prepared for the Assyrian ruler in the afterlife, according to 30:31–33.

Fourth, in each of these sections we see prophetic condemnation of Judah's attempts to rely on other nations for support. Ahaz's reliance on Assyria for help against Aram and Israel is the political context of Isa 7–8 (7:15–20; 8:4–8; cf. 2 Kgs 16:5–9). Isaiah's performative sign in chapter 20—backside exposure—is said to represent the shame and uncoveredness which would come upon Judah for trusting in the alliance with Egypt and Cush against Assyria; this prose chapter occurs right in the middle of the OAN section, with five oracles before and five after. Chapters 30 and 31 contain the most explicit condemnations of reliance on Egypt and foreign alliances (30:1–5, 16–17; 31:1–3), which are then echoed in the words of the Rabshakeh (36:6, 9).

Fifth, each of these sections contains a time of intense trial; cataclysmic destruction, followed by a rebirth/restoration. The destruction is typically presented in terms of the elimination of cultivation and a return to the "wild and waste" in which primeval waters, darkness, desert, wild animals and thorns have taken over. We see this sort of destruction particularly in 5:24–30; 6:11–13; 7:21–25; 8:22; the so-called "Isaiah Apocalypse" in 24:1–25:5 and 34:1–17. These "de-creation" passages are frequently complemented by rebirth and restoration. Examples would include the holy seed from a stump (6:13; 11:1ff);

darkness into light in 9:2–7 [9:1–6 MT]; the banquet on the quiet mountainside after cataclysm (25:6–12) and the highway in the desert for returnees (35).

Alongside these passages, I suggest we might add the threats faced by Jerusalem and Hezekiah in the Sennacherib siege (Isa 36–37) and Hezekiah's illness (38). The complete destruction faced by Jerusalem and by Hezekiah as well as the corresponding destruction of Jerusalem's enemies is presented in terms of recession of cultivation and the takeover by chaotic forces. Assyria threatens to "lay waste" to Jerusalem (37:18; cf. 37:26–27), which YHWH himself has cultivated (37:24–25)—and most of Judah, with the exception of Jerusalem, does experience significant damage. After this trial, a shoot will spring from the stump of Judah (37:30–32). Hezekiah's deathly illness represents the near triumph of Sheol and miraculous restoration to productive life afterward (38:9–20). These stories are highly suggestive of the motifs of trial and rebirth.

Sixth, in each of these three larger sections of First Isaiah, an idealised Davidic figure plays a role (in contrast to Isa 40–66, from which David is largely absent), who will bring about YHWH's peace (without reliance on other nations) and the right administration of YHWH's law. Isaiah 1–38, apart from the failure of chapter 39, points decisively toward Hezekiah as the anticipated fulfilment of this figure:

...The figure of Hezekiah himself is drawn into this vision of the nation's future by the structuring of the book which makes his reign so central. Isaiah 6:1–9:6 (with the other associated passages...) imply that Hezekiah is the 'second David' who is completely to fulfill God's promises: it is in his lifetime that the anticipated era of universal peace and security will be ushered in. Isaiah 36–39 also make this link between Hezekiah and God's promises ... It seems that the figure of Hezekiah has himself become detached from any historical moorings and has become within the literary context of the book of Isaiah just as fully eschatological as Isaiah 40–55.¹⁸

This aspiration is easiest to see in the narrative parallels between Ahaz and Hezekiah, each of whom faced a siege, was tempted to rely on foreign support and was offered a sign¹⁹ to strengthen his faith. Unlike Ahaz, Hezekiah shows himself to be a man of prayer, both during the siege and in his illness (38), proving that he is the true spiritual heir of David.²⁰ Isaiah 1–12 is critical of Ahaz,

¹⁸ Iain W. Provan, "The Messiah in the Books of Kings," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 82–83.

¹⁹ Ahaz rejects the sign (7:10–17) because he wants public support for an appeal to Assyria (cf. 8:12). Hezekiah trusts even before the signs are given (37:30–35; 38:7–8) and then praises YHWH in the day of salvation.

²⁰ Note also the possible parallel: in each section, at least one sign-act spanning three years—8:1–4; 16:14; 20:3 and 37:30.

looking instead to a future faithful Davidic figure who would fulfil these purposes—the “branch of YHWH” (4:2–6), the child which would be born to hold the government on his shoulders (9:6–7 [MT 5–6]) and the shoot from the stump of Jesse (11:1–16). In our second major section (Isa 13–27), Moabite refugees find protection through the strong, well-established throne of their distant cousin, a Davidide (16:5). The city and house of David appear to be well established in chapter 22 (22:9, 21–22). These passages related to David in Isa 1–27 may therefore represent hopes that, for some in the late eighth century or beyond, Hezekiah (or perhaps his righteous descendant, Josiah) could possibly have fulfilled.

Finally, we return to the first elements that Isa 1–12 and 13–27 share—conclusion with songs to sing in the day of salvation/restoration/rebirth. Stansell observes similarities of “Psalm-like, liturgical character” between chapters 12 and 33.²¹ Chapter 35 refers to rejoicing and joyful shouting but does not actually include a specific song to sing in the day of salvation.

When we consider the next unit to be not Isa 28–35 but Isa 28–39, two poems may be found as parallels. I suggest that the so-called “taunt song” (37:22b–29) and the Psalm of Hezekiah (38:9–20) may serve as a fitting poetic-performance conclusion that mirrors the closure of the other major First Isaiah sections. The lyrical quality of YHWH’s response to Hezekiah in 37:22b–29 has led to its designation by some as a “mocking song”²² or a “taunt song.”²³ Some have suggested that מכתב (“writing”) in 38:9 should be corrected to מכתם, a title of unknown meaning used to describe several psalms.²⁴ Even so, the poem concludes with references to “playing songs with stringed instruments” (וַיִּגְּדוּ וַיִּנְגְּנוּ, v. 20) and is generally acknowledged as a song of thanks.²⁵

²¹ Stansell, “Isaiah 28–33,” 79.

²² Christopher R. Seitz, *Zion’s Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah. A Reassessment of Isaiah 36–39* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 88.

²³ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 276; Willem A.M. Beuken, *Isaiah II/2* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; trans. Brian Doyle; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 364.

²⁴ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 28–39: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002 [1982]), 437. The LXX reads προσευχή; Wildberger comments, “That MT read מכתב (a writing) simply shows that they were already puzzled about the meaning of מכתם (Miktam) in ancient times.” However, Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 480, considers this doubtful: “LXX consistently renders *miktam* in the psalms as στήλογραφία or εἰς στήλογραφίαν, “a stele inscription” or “for a stele inscription,” never προσευχή.”

²⁵ Wildberger, *Isaiah 28–39*, 452; Childs, *Isaiah*, 283; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 483.

Table 2: Sections of Isa 1–38

	Isaiah 1–12	Isaiah 13–27	Isaiah 28–38
Litany of Judgments	Six “woes” (5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22)	Ten “burdens” (13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1; 21:11; 21:13; 22:1; 23:1)	Six “woes” (28:1; 29:1; 29:15; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1)
Antagonistic Empire	Assyria (7–10)	Babylon (13–14; 21:9; 23:13; 24–27) Assyria (20)	Assyria (28–33; 36–38)
Empire: YHWH’s Instrument	Against Aram, Israel, other nations, Judah (7:20; 8:4–8; 10:5–6, 15)	Against Judah (13:3–16)	Against Ephraim (28:11–13, 18), Ariel (29:1–4), other nations (36:18–20)
Self-Exalting, Blasphemous Ruler	King of Assyria (10:8–14)	King of Babylon (14:12–15)	King of Assyria (30:31–33); Sennacherib (36:18–20; 37:10–13)
Reliance on Other Nations Condemned	Rely on Assyria against Israel–Aram (7:15–20; 8:4–8)	Rely on Egypt and Cush against Assyria (20)	Rely on Egypt against Assyria (30:1–5, 16–17; 31:1–3; 36:6, 9)
Intense Trial, Cataclysmic Destruction	5:24–30; 6:11–13; 7:21–25; 8:22	“Isaiah Apocalypse” (24:1–25:5)	The nations (34); Assyrian army (37); Hezekiah (38:1–8)
Rebirth/Restoration Following Trial	6:13; 9:2–7; 11:1ff	25:6–12	Return from exile (35); Jerusalem rescued (37:36–38); “Resurrected” king (38:9, 21)
Idealised Davidic Ruler	Branch (4:2) Child (9:6–7) Shoot from Jesse’s stump (11:1ff.)	House of David (16:4b–5) ²⁶	Hezekiah (36–38)
Poems of Praise in the Day of Salvation	Two songs (12:1–3, 4–6)	Two songs (26:1–6; 27:1–5)	YHWH’s song against Sennacherib (37:22b–29) Hezekiah’s writing (or <i>miktam</i>?) of healing (38:9–20)

3 Provisional Conclusion for the Next Step

The observation of parallels between Isa 28–38(39) and Isa 1–12 and 13–27 is not terribly profound in that much prophetic material follows the same general pattern—prediction of judgment, judgment, promise of a remnant and messiah,

²⁶ See also passing references to David’s established house in 22:9, 21–22.

restoration. However, the specific parallels do draw the attention even more closely to comparisons between the sections. Based on these patterns, it may be concluded that Isa 28–39 (therefore Isa 1–39 also) has more cohesion than is commonly attributed. It is particularly intriguing that Hezekiah's prayer is not included in 2 Kgs 20, which could lead one to think that the editor of First Isaiah is intentionally rounding off a larger section—chapters 28–38, minus the failure of chapter 39—with this poem in order to create a fitting parallel to the earlier sections—chapters 1–12 and 13–27.

The structure proposed here does not preclude other structural or redactional considerations but focuses mainly on the reader encountering the text, as it leads up to the Hezekiah narratives. From the standpoint of a reader looking back from chapter 38, one might be led to think that Hezekiah's kingdom would be the fulfilment of the aspirations of the book thus far, given his obedience and his connection to YHWH (trust rewarded with miraculous salvation). This is why Isa 39 comes as such a disappointment because there was apparently no precedent in the book called Isaiah.

Thus far, we have considered two structural features of First Isaiah—the structure of a section that begins in chapter 28 and the additions to and subtractions from 2 Kgs 18–20 as adapted into Isaiah. Both of these structural devices serve to strengthen the unity of Isa 1–39 and to enhance the portrait of Hezekiah leading up to chapter 39. This proposal concerning the rhetorical impact of First Isaiah becomes clearer when compared to the presentations of Hezekiah in Kings and Chronicles.

D TOWARD AN EXEMPLARY 'HEZEKIAH' IN CHRONICLES

As mentioned above, we are starting from the premise that the parallel narrative material in Isaiah is drawn from Kings and that Chronicles is aware of both texts. Each of these three narrative orders includes and excludes elements (that were known to the story makers/redactors) according to its own set of priorities. The editorial choices of the Chronicler provide a useful contrast with those of the Isaiah editors.

A reconstructed chronological presentation of the elements in Kings and Isaiah alternates between positive and negative stories about Hezekiah (see Table 1 above). Each of the three literary accounts therefore presents elements of Hezekiah's reign out of chronological order.

Kings provides a fuller narrative account of Hezekiah's life including the standard succession formula and Deuteronomistic assessments. Kings places the siege narrative, which receives the longest attention, early in the text because of

the connection to Assyria’s conquest of Northern Israel.²⁷ Kings presents a mixture of good and bad activities of Hezekiah including the initial attempt to buy off Sennacherib. The Babylonian Emissary story, though it occurs before the siege, provides a fitting transition to Manasseh (2 Kgs 20:21). Hezekiah’s building achievements, throughout his reign but perhaps in the build-up to the 701 BCE siege, are mentioned in conclusion (2 Kgs 20:20). The editors seem to be concerned about completeness of a portrait and with appropriate connections to what comes before and after.

Isaiah follows the order of events in Kings, copying the text mostly verbatim. Nonetheless, the Isaiah editor chose a beginning and an ending for this adoption of Kings material for a reason—while making one subtraction (Tribute Narrative) and one addition (Psalm of Hezekiah). The effect and perhaps the aim of these revisions is to make Hezekiah look better, at least up until chapter 39. The conclusion is abrupt and unsoftened by Dtr’s reference to building achievements (2 Kgs 20:20).

By contrast, Chronicles takes an approach to Hezekiah that is quite different from either Kings or Isaiah. The Chronicler seems to be aware of the Hezekiah traditions from both earlier books. However, his attention is mainly on the cultic reforms, which are the focus of three chapters (2 Chr 29–31) and include not only Deuteronomistic centralisation but also extensive focus on the Levites and priests. Warhurst has demonstrated that even in this non-synoptic narrative material, the speeches and the actions of the Chronicler’s Hezekiah are presented in Isaianic language and imagery, “presenting him as a prefigural embodiment of Isaiah’s prophetic hopes.”²⁸

In addressing the key elements of the narrative that are found in Kings and Isaiah, the Chronicler truncates,²⁹ re-arranges and changes the story—in accordance with his philosophy of history. The Chronicler prefers to segregate

²⁷ Contra Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, 9, who says, “The curious order of chapters 36–37; 38; 39 is explicable in the context of Isaiah, but it finds more difficult explanation in Kings.”

²⁸ Amber K. Warhurst, “The Chronicler’s Use of the Prophets,” in *What Was Authoritative for Chronicles?* (ed. Ehud Ben Zvi and Diana Edelman; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 165–181 (172).

²⁹ I suggest elsewhere that a technological constraint may have played a role in the Chronicler’s editorial approach to Hezekiah source material: “Though writing technology alone cannot explain the Chronicler’s decision to summarize, we may speculate that space may have played a factor: approaching the end of the physical scroll, the Chronicler chose to rely on summaries of Kings and Isaiah material. (This likely also explains the accelerated/abbreviated account of the Kingdom of Judah’s last days: 2 Kings 23:31–25:30 compared to 2 Chronicles 36:2–21).” See Benjamin D. Giffone, *Storymaking, Textual Development, and Varying Conceptions of Cultic Centralization: Gathering and Fitting Unhewn Stones* (FAT II 142; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), 71–72.

exemplary and non-exemplary actions of a single monarch into different periods and to present clear causal relationships between good deeds and rewards and evil deeds and punishment. This affects his handling of the negative aspects of Hezekiah's reign. Whereas the Isaiah editor eliminates the Tribute Narrative (2 Kgs 18:14–16), the Chronicler transforms the story altogether into an episode of faith in YHWH and fortifying Jerusalem (exploiting the concluding reference to Hezekiah's building achievements in 2 Kgs 20:20). Trust in YHWH and fortifying Jerusalem are hallmarks of good kings in Chronicles. The siege story is much shorter than either the Kings or the Isaiah version and does not refer to reliance on Egypt. The vague references to the matter of the Babylonian emissary (2 Chr 32:25–26, 31) are construed as a "test" (v. 31) and as an opportunity for Hezekiah to be a penitent example like David (v. 26; cf. 1 Chr 21).³⁰ The role of Isaiah the prophet is rather minimal in the Chronicler's story: Hezekiah speaks directly to YHWH without mediation. The notion that Hezekiah pursued an alliance with Babylon against Assyria, which may have been the purpose of the emissary's visit, is not even entertained by the Chronicler—reliance on other nations is anathema to him.

In summary, the Chronicler seems to be aware of the received Hezekiah traditions in both Kings and Isaiah but chooses a different presentation of Hezekiah based on his own priorities and emphases. Nevertheless, the Chronicler is aware of the key themes of Isaiah, including those pertaining to the royal figure and he has allowed the book (not just Isa 36–39) to influence his portrayal of Hezekiah. Thus, the Chronicler may be seen as continuing in some sense the tendency of Isa 36–38 to "whitewash" Hezekiah's record. The Chronicler has handled the shocking conclusion of the Hezekiah material (the Babylonian Emissary) differently than does the book of Isaiah, due to the post-exilic focus of his work. Whereas Isa 39 effects a deferral of all the built-up but unfulfilled hopes for Hezekiah in Isa 1–38, the Chronicler transforms the eschatological messages of the prophets: "...In order to mitigate the danger of completely relegating restoration hopes to a future era or of spiritualising them so that they no longer have reference to real history, the Chronicler retrojects restoration prospects onto descriptions of past history."³¹

³⁰ Goswell independently comes to a similar conclusion: "The source of the motif of pride is the Chronicler's reading of the psalm of Hezekiah (Isa 38). Noticing the admission of fault on the part of the sick king in Isa 38, the Chronicler depicts Hezekiah coming to the godly recognition that he was not worthy of the benefit received from God and humbling himself before God. In so doing, Hezekiah models for readers the Chronistic ethic of repentance as the way of averting divinely threatened judgment." Gregory Goswell, "The Puzzling Portrait of Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 32:24–31," *VT* (2023):13, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685330-bja10114>.

³¹ Warhurst, "The Chronicler's Use of the Prophets," 181.

E CONCLUSION

The Chronicler and the Isaiah editor both retain one key failure of Hezekiah but with different narrative purposes. The Chronicler, looking back at the history of Judah with knowledge of the return from exile, seeks not the cause of the exile *per se* but rather examples of penitence for the benefit of his postexilic community. In Isa 36–39, the focus is the fitness of Hezekiah to fulfil the aspirations of the Davidic monarchy that are expressed in the book of Isaiah up to this point.³² The exclusion of the story of Hezekiah's tribute to Sennacherib (2 Kgs 18:14–16) encourages the reader to hold out hope for Hezekiah from the beginning of the narratives, by portraying Hezekiah in as positive a light as possible. Hezekiah's failure in Isa 39 then comes as more of a disappointment since there was apparently no precedent for this lack of faith.

What possible historical setting could there be for something like a "First Isaiah" that would literarily raise and dash hopes concerning Hezekiah for a naïve reader? It seems unlikely that Isa 1–38 existed as some independent, pro-Hezekiah redaction that was later supplemented with chapter 39. To what end, then, is a mostly-positive-until-the-final-page portrait of Hezekiah presented in First Isaiah? A context in the reign of Josiah might be possible; various scholars

³² Though, even in Isaiah, penitence is a factor in the positive portrait of Hezekiah. According to Darr, if Hezekiah bears some sort of guilt for pursuing alliance with Egypt, not trusting YHWH and bringing this invasion upon himself—the proverb in 37:3b functions as a confession by Hezekiah: "Understood within its Isaianic context, Hezekiah's saying functions as the confession of a now powerless monarch who, in violation of the expressed policy of Yahweh's prophet, has willfully chosen to rely on his own strength and that of his allies. Note the proverb's emphasis upon lack of strength (*wekoah 'ayin leleda*). It is not, of course, the babies' lack of strength that is bemoaned. Unlike Hosea (Hos. 13.13), Hezekiah does not expect infants to assist in their own deliveries. Neither does he believe that Yahweh lacks the strength to rescue. Rather, the mothers' strength is required to push out babies. And it is Hezekiah, along with his advisors, who bears responsibility for his city and its inhabitants—a responsibility that at this desperate hour he is utterly unable to honour" (Darr, "No Strength to Deliver," 243). But this turns Hezekiah into a penitential sinner, unlike Ahaz: "Here is our paradigmatic Hezekiah: he is exemplary not because he never acts contrary to God's will, but because he does what was called for already in Isa. 1.27. He repents. Once the rupture in his relationship with Isaiah and with 'Yahweh your God' is repaired through a humble confession of weakness and other acts of contrition (torn clothes, sackcloth, a trek to the temple, Isa. 37.1) and he receives Isaiah's positive oracular response (37.5-7), Hezekiah can approach God directly in prayer, without Isaiah's further intercession (37.15-21)" (Darr, "No Strength to Deliver," 244).

have attributed elements of First Isaiah to this period, with several different rationales.³³

A more compelling literary and theological rationale may be found within the book's own sense of the hiddenness and gradual unfolding of YHWH's intention:

Bind up the testimony; seal (חתום) the instruction among my disciples. And I will wait for YHWH, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob—I will wait-eagerly (וקייתי) for him (Isa 8:16–17).

And this whole vision will be for you as words of a sealed (החתום) scroll, which, when they give it to one who knows the scroll (i.e., is literate), saying, "Please read this," he will say, "I cannot, because it is sealed (חתום)" (Isa 29:11).

And [he] will say in that day: "Behold, this is our God, for whom we have waited-eagerly (קיינו), that he might save us! This is YHWH, for whom we have waited-eagerly (קיינו); let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation!" (Isa 25:9).

Second Isaiah builds upon this idea of sealed foreknowledge now being revealed, by references to "declaring/calling from the beginning" (40:21; 41:4, 26; 46:10).

As Provan has observed (quoted above), Hezekiah in Isaiah becomes "fully eschatological" and "detached from any historical moorings."³⁴ Even for an Isaianic editor trying to present Hezekiah in the best light possible, prophecy itself always has an expectant quality that allows for dissatisfaction with the present and hope for the future. No matter how exemplary Hezekiah was, no matter how glorious YHWH's deliverance of Judah in Hezekiah's day was, there is more to come (in judgment and in salvation). The three sections of Isa 1–39 see both Hezekiah and beyond Hezekiah in prophetic fashion.

This portrait of the Hezekiah figure that evolves to be "fully eschatological" also helps to account for the abrupt ending of First Isaiah in contrast to the Deuteronomistic blame placed on Manasseh for the exile (2 Kgs 21:10–15). Kings regards Manasseh's reign as a watershed moment after which there is no hope of averting exile (2 Kgs 23:26; 24:3), somewhat deflecting the blame from Hezekiah. The book of Isaiah does not even consider Manasseh but looks beyond exile to restoration. The Chronicler has this same post-exilic eschatological horizon as the editor of Isaiah (at least of Isa 1–55) but positions both Hezekiah and Manasseh as examples of penitence that can lead to further blessing.

³³ Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 443; Ronald E. Clements, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem: A Study of the Interpretation of Prophecy in the Old Testament* (JSOTSupp 13; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 65.

³⁴ Provan, "The Messiah in the Books of Kings," 82–83.

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